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FM AMCONSUL CALCUTTA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0869
INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 0807
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI 0318
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 0318
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA 0186
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0190
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RUEHC/USAID WASHDC
RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 1062

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 CALCUTTA 000148

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: LEFTIST PROJECTED TO WIN WEST BENGAL STATE ASSEMBLY
ELECTIONS

REF: A) CALCUTTA 00109 B) CALCUTTA 00105

11. (SBU) Summary: On April 17, West Bengal will hold its first phase of the state assembly elections. With only a few days remaining, main opposition parties the Trinamul Congress (Trinamul) and the Congress Party (Congress) have failed to unite against the ruling Left Front. The only "opposition" faced by the Left Front in its campaign has come from the stringent guidelines being enforced by the national Election Commission (EC). The Leftist leaders have expressed strong objection to some of the EC's actions, including raids in Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) offices. However, the Left leadership claims that they will follow all EC directives. Even with the additional oversight, The Left Front is still expected to win more than 200 of the 294 state assembly seats. The EC is also initiating security measures for the first phase of polling in the Maoist-affected districts. End Summary.

Opposition Fails to Unite

12. (U) Despite extensive discussions, principal opposition parties Congress and Trinamul have failed to forge an alliance against the ruling Left Front. The anti-Left votes will therefore split between the two parties, helping the Left to win the state government for the seventh consecutive time. Trinamul chief Mamata Banerjee had called for a "mahajot" or grand alliance that would include the Congress. However, Congress declined since her party is allied with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a Hindu communal party. Banerjee is leading a platform, the Paschimanga Ganatantrik Front (West Bengal Democratic Front) that includes the BJP and other smaller parties. The Trinamul is fielding 252 candidates, leaving 32 seats for the BJP and 10 for smaller allies. Congress announced 260 electoral candidates, leaving other seats for smaller allies like the Party for Democratic Socialism (PDS) and Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM). Congress is also experiencing trouble in the party stronghold of Murshidabad district. As a result of factional fighting, the district Congress chief is fielding independent candidates to challenge official Congress candidates chosen by the central leadership.

Left versus Election Commission

13. (SBU) Lacking a serious competitor, the EC seems to have become the Left's only "opposition." The EC has come down heavily on alleged electoral malpractices in West Bengal where the Left Front has ruled uninterrupted for the past 29 years. The EC cleaned-up the electoral rolls of fake and dead voters, whose names have been used in the past by the Left to stuff the ballot box, deleting more than 1.4 million names in the process.

The EC also controlled issuance of photo-identity cards for voters, banned political graffiti, has ordered the installation digital cameras in voting booths and the presence of central police personnel at polling stations among a range of other stringent measures to ensure free and fair elections. The voting process also will be in an unprecedented five phases to facilitate greater supervision (April 17, 22 and 27, and then May 3 and 8. Counting will take place on May 11.) Not even the corruption-plagued Bihar had as many phases in its 2005 assembly elections.

14. (U) In response to the EC pressure, on April 3 a Left Front delegation led by CPM General Secretary Prakash Karat met with the EC authorities to protest its measures, specifically the deployment of central paramilitary forces in all polling booths, the deletion of a large number of voters from the electoral rolls, the "biased" role of certain observers and the ban on graffiti, posters and banners in West Bengal. The Left alleged that opposition parties were trying to have names of genuine voters deleted from the electoral list by furnishing biased information to the EC. Karat added that CPM MP Alokesha Das had been served a notice by the EC to prove he is a genuine citizen and not an illegal Bangladeshi settler in West Bengal.

15. (U) During the night of April 4-5, police and central paramilitary force personnel raided two CPM offices in Keshpur,

CALCUTTA 00000148 002 OF 002

Midnapore district, under instructions from an EC observer to look for arms and ammunition. CPM alleged that Trinamul members accompanied the raiding force. The CPM lodged a protest with the Chief Election Commissioner. However, the EC maintained that the observer performed his duties correctly, while the CPM complained of his partisan behaviour.

16. (U) Further on April 5, EC lodged a police complaint against West Bengal Transport Minister and CPM candidate Subhas Chakraborty, charging his public outburst against election officials "aimed at preventing officials from impartially performing their duties of free and fair elections." Chakraborty reportedly said that state bureaucrats engaged in poll work were "going too far in the name of conducting elections." He warned that after the election process was over on May 11, he would teach the state bureaucrats who followed the EC guidelines in administering the elections a lesson. He threatened that they were on the payroll of his government and would have to fall to the feet of the state ministers for whom they worked. Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya and Karat admitted that Chakraborty's remarks were inflammatory and that he had made a mistake.

The Red Fort Secure

17. (U) With the opposition disunited and lacking an alternative political agenda, the Left is expected to win easily, possibly in a landslide. A CNN-IBN-Hindu pre-poll survey shows the Left Front increasing its number of seats from its present 199 to 233-243, out of a total of 294. The Congress with its current 26 seats is expected to only win 24-30 and Trinamul may see a significant drop from 60 to only 24-30 seats.

A Kolkata TV-Org Marg survey indicates that the Left Front may win only 200-210 seats, and Trinamul and Congress would retain approximately their present number of seats. A Star Ananda-A.C. Nielsen survey shows more than 210 seats for the Left, 38-40

seats for the Trinamul and 30-32 seats for the Congress.

First Phase: Tackling Maoists

¶18. (U) In response to the persistent threat of Maoist violence, the EC directed West Bengal, Bihar and Jharkhand governments to ensure inter-state borders were sealed during the polling period in the Maoist-affected districts of West Midnapore, Bankura and Purulia. In recent months, the Maoists have targeted and murdered CPM officials in these districts (Reftel) and have called for a boycott of the elections. Deputy Election Commissioner R. Balakrishnan told the press that EC and local officials were prepared and have reviewed all aspects of election management and security arrangements in the three districts.

¶19. (SBU) Comment: The CPM and Left Front allies are expected to win a sizeable majority of the state assembly seats in the coming election. The only question is whether it will be landslide victory as indicated by some pre-voting polls. If Chief Minister Bhattacharya is able to lead the Left Front to a major victory, he will likely feel secure enough to implement more radical free market economic reforms for the state and to more aggressively court foreign investment.

JARDINE